

The Sukkah Synthesis: A Sukkot Lesson from Avraham Avinu's Life

Sukkot is a funny thing. In the fall, we take ourselves out of the comfort of our own home for a week to sit in a decorated hut at the mercy of the weather. The hope is to transport ourselves back to the ancient days to relive the Jewish experience in the desert. On Pesach, we read the Hagadah to relive the Exodus, and on Shavuot we stay up all night to relive *Matan Torah* (Giving of the Torah at Sinai) — but on Sukkot we go so far as to build real-life structures outside and are then commanded to sit in them for seven days:

בַּסֻּכּוֹת תֵּשְׁבוּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים כָּל הָאִזְרָח בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל יֵשְׁבוּ בַּסֻּכּוֹת.

You shall live in booths seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths.

Vayikra 23:42

We are expected to make this structure symbolically our “home” by eating meals, praying, resting, braving the elements, and sleeping within its walls. Isn't this taking things a bit too far?

מִשְׁרָשֵׁי הַמִּצְוָה. מֵה שֶׁמִּפְרָשׁ בְּכַתּוּב, לְמַעַן נִזְכֵּר הַנִּסִּים הַגְּדוֹלִים שֶׁעָשָׂה הָאֱלֹהִים לְבְּרִיךְ הוּא לְאֲבוֹתֵינוּ בְּמִדְבָּר בְּצֵאתָם מִמִּצְרַיִם שֶׁכַּחֲסֵם מַעֲנֵנִי כְבוֹד שֶׁלֹּא יִזְקֶה לָהֶם הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ בְּיוֹם וּקְרָה בְּלֵילָה. וְיֵשׁ שֶׁפָּרְשׁוּ (סוּכָה י"א, ב), שֶׁסֻּכּוֹת מִמֶּשׁ עָשׂוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִדְבָּר, וּמִתּוֹךְ זְכוּרָת נִפְלְאוֹתָיו שֶׁעָשָׂה עִמָּנוּ וְעַם אֲבוֹתֵינוּ נִזְהָר בְּמִצְוֹתָיו בְּרִיךְ הוּא, וְנִהְיָ רְאוּיִים לְקַבֵּל הַטּוֹבָה מֵאֵתוֹ, וְזֶהוּ חֲפָצוֹ בְּרִיךְ הוּא שֶׁחָפֵץ לְהִיטִיב.

From the root of the mitzvah: What is



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explicit in the verse, to recall the great miracles that G-d performed for our forefathers in the wilderness as they left Egypt. He covered them in the Clouds of Glory so that the sun would not harm them during the day, or the ice at night. Some explain (Talmud, Sukkah 11b) that the Israelites made physical huts in the wilderness. Through recalling His wonders that He did for us and our forefathers we will be careful with His commandments, and we will be worthy of receiving good from Him. That is always His wish, to do good.

Sefer HaChinuch, mitzvah no. 325

As the *Sefer HaChinuch*¹ explains, the reason for actually building and sitting in the sukkah is to recreate the imagery of the Clouds of Glory, and to remember the great miracles and *chessed* (kindness and grace) that G-d performed for the Jews in the desert. As it states in the *Derech Hashem*:²

כִּי הִנֵּה עֲנֵנֵי הַכְּבוֹד שֶׁהִקִּיף הַקָּב"ה אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל מִלְבַּד תּוֹעֵלְתָם בְּגִשְׁמִיּוֹת שֶׁהִיָּה לְסִכְךָ עֲלֵיהֶם וְלִהְיוֹן בְּעֵדָם ... שֶׁ"י הַעֲנָנִים הָהֵם, הֵיוּ נִמְצָאִים יִשְׂרָאֵל מוֹבְדִלִים לְבָדָם וְנִשְׁוֹאִים מִן הָאָרֶץ ... נִבְדָּלִים מִכָּל הָעַמִּים וּמְנוֹשָׂאִים

וּמְנוֹשָׂאִים מִן הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה עֲצָמוּ ... וּמִתְחַדָּשׁ דְּבַר זֶה בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּחַג הַסֻּכּוֹת עַל יְדֵי הַסֻּכָּה. *The Ananaei Hakavod (Clouds of Glory) provided Bnei Israel (Nation of Israel) with both physical and spiritual protection. ... The clouds caused Bnei Israel to be separated from all other nations and through divine protection they were literally removed from the physical world. ... This is the historical and spiritual remembrance that is renewed every Sukkot through the sukkah itself.*

It is not enough for us to just read the story and feel thankful to G-d for protecting the children of Israel in dangerous conditions or believe that He can do it again. We need to bring ourselves out of the comforts of our homes, look up to the stars, and feel G-d's presence in our lives today. During the time of harvest, a farmer might come to think that he alone is responsible for the success of his crop and forget that G-d is the true benefactor. By sitting in the sukkah, we proclaim to G-d that we trust in Him and that He is the reason we have any of our physical comforts to

begin with. We feel His kindness and acknowledge His kindness, so we echo His benevolence to us.

There are two primary *middot* (character traits) that are reflected back to us by celebration of the sukkah. The first is the *middah* (character trait) of *chessed*, loving kindness. G-d gave us life, protection, and miracles. By physically sitting in the sukkah, we can look up to G-d and be grateful for all of his kindness toward us, and in turn, we can be more giving people. The second *middah* is that of *emunah*, faith. G-d had faith in us in the desert, and, therefore, He saved us. We, in turn, need to renew our faith in G-d by sitting in the sukkah and by remembering that everything comes from Him. This synthesis of *chessed* and *emunah* is the “Sukkah Synthesis.”

These two *middot*, *chessed* and *emunah*, are closely connected to Avraham Avinu (our forefather Abraham), the first of the seven *Ushpizin*. The *Ushpizin* are the seven supernal guests we invite to our sukkot, the seven “founding fathers,” also known as the “seven shepherds” of the Jewish people: Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov, Moshe, Aaron, Yosef, and David. Avraham was the embodiment of the two qualities that reflect the intrinsic spiritual quality of the sukkah. The Rambam³ writes that one cannot experience the true joy of any Jewish holiday without opening one’s gates to welcome the underprivileged and downtrodden, providing them food and nourishment. Therefore, on Sukkot, we practice *hachnasat orchim*, welcoming guests into our homes, to both physical and spiritual guests. The sukkah is not meant to be a stand-alone home but a welcoming tent like that of Avraham. By welcoming Avraham as the first of

the *Ushpizin*, we celebrate Avraham as the personality who embodied both *middot* of the “Sukkah Synthesis.”

Avraham: Man of Chessed

From the moment we meet Avraham, we are informed of his giving nature. When G-d first came to Avraham and commanded him to leave his home,⁴ the Torah described Avraham taking his wife, his nephew Lot, all of their belongings, and those who were “made in Charan” on this journey. The Midrash⁵ tells us that Avraham converted the men and Sarah converted the women when they camped and as they traveled. Not only did Avraham care for and give to those they converted, but he opened up his home to his nephew Lot, despite their conflicting moral views. Avraham was a man who followed in G-d’s footprints of protection, giving, and kindness, and became His premier exponent.

In his introduction to Sefer Breishit (Book of Genesis), the Netziv⁶ notes that Sefer Breishit is sometimes called “*Sefer HaYashar*,” the Book of the “Upright.” In his explanation of this name, the Netziv explains that Sefer Breishit is not only the book of creation, but it is the book of our forefathers, all of whom were “*yashar*” (straight and upright) individuals with integrity. The Netziv cites many examples, but with regard to Avraham, he recounts Avraham’s debate with G-d to save the city of Sodom. This city was described in the Torah as a place of “*very evil and great sinners*,”⁷ and despite knowing this, Avraham stood overlooking Sodom and fought for their survival. This, says the Netziv, is what being *yashar* means: someone who will not settle for the acceptance of another’s punishment until they

know they’ve been given the full benefit of any doubt and they’ve given all their might to save them. Avraham is the *ish yashar*, the man on the straight path, the epitome of a man of *chessed*.

The Midrash⁷ further emphasizes the greatness of Avraham’s *chessed* in its description of the events following his circumcision. The Torah states that G-d appeared to Avraham in the “*heat of the day*.”⁸ The Midrash explains that G-d was coming to visit Avraham and perform the mitzvah of *bikur cholim*, visiting the sick, on the most painful day of recovery, the third day. In order to alleviate Avraham’s pain and knowing Avraham’s *middah* of *hachnasat orchim*, G-d brought out the sun in its fullest form to ensure that no one would be walking around, and Avraham could sit inside his tent and rest, instead of waiting in the heat for guests. The Midrash continues to explain that Avraham was so upset to see there were no visitors walking past his tent that G-d brought the angels in the form of people, so that Avraham could perform the mitzvah of *hachnasat orchim* on that day. Avraham never ceased doing *chessed*.

Furthermore, when Avraham welcomed the three angels to his home, he said that he would bring water for their feet and bread to satiate themselves.⁹ When he prepared the food, the Torah describes that instead of bread, Avraham brought the best and softest meat, cream, and milk — he brought a feast! Avraham was a man who exemplifies the mishna in *Pirkei Avot*,¹⁰ (*Ethics of the Fathers*), which states, “*say a little and do a lot*.” Not only does he bring them the best delicacies, but he involves his whole family in the process. The Midrash¹¹ describes that Avraham brought along Yishmael, his spiritually troubled

son, while gathering the guests their food, to train him in *mitzvot*. He was constantly doing and giving, only for the sake of Heaven, with little fanfare.

Although only a few examples are recounted here, Avraham was a man of consummate generosity, and always performing good deeds. G-d, in return, was constantly giving to him. G-d granted Avraham two children, a loving wife, money, security of his survival, and the eternity of the Jewish nation. It is from Avraham Avinu that we learn what it means to give, open our doors, and bring others to Torah and *mitzvot*. It is also through Avraham Avinu that we learn and see the great *chesed* G-d does for us in return for our generosity. The verb “to give” in Hebrew is נתן, (*natan*), which is a palindrome. When you give, it comes back in return. This is the first aspect of the “Sukkah Synthesis.”

Avraham: Man of Emunah

Not only was Avraham a man of *chesed*, but, in fact, he was the founder of *emunah*, faith in G-d. The Rambam writes about the days before monotheism:

ולא יודעו אלא יחידים בעולם כגון חנוך ומתושלח נח שם ועבר ועל דרך זה היה העולם הולך ומתגלגל עד שנולד עמודו של עולם והוא אברהם אבינו:

The Eternal Rock was not recognized or known by anyone in the world, with the exception of a few individuals: for example, Chanoch, Metushelach, Noach, Shem, and Ever. The world continued in this fashion until the pillar of the world — the Patriarch Abraham — was born.

Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 1:2

Avraham was the first, after many generations, to recognize G-d, and believe in His omnipotence. At that time, the population of Ur Kasdim,

including his father, who was a purveyor of idols, worshiped rocks, trees, and stars. Avraham saw beyond the stars, and recognized the creator and mover of the stars was G-d Himself. Avraham tried to convince everyone in Ur Kasdim that there was only one G-d, but to no avail. He was exiled from Ur Kasdim and thrown into the fiery furnace of King Nimrod, from which he escaped unscathed. The Midrash¹² recounts that while both Avraham and his brother Haran were sent by Nimrod into the trial of fire, only Avraham survived while Haran perished. If Haran had internalized Avraham’s teaching that there is only one G-d, perhaps he too would have been saved from the flames. Avraham’s *emunah* in G-d was reciprocated by G-d’s kindness and salvation.

Once Avraham established this faith, G-d tested him further. To be the “father of many nations,”¹³ and to be the pillar of *emunah*, Avraham needed to be tested, and fulfill his great potential.¹⁴ There were ten tests. When G-d told Avraham to leave his land,¹⁵ Avraham believed, without hesitation, that G-d would protect him on this journey, and that it would both pleasurable and good.¹⁶ When Avraham finally made it to Israel¹⁷ and was struck with famine, the Midrash¹⁸ explains that he moved down to Egypt, following the will of G-d. When Sarah was captured in Egypt,¹⁹ Avraham never lost sight of G-d’s salvation, and she was returned to him in good health. Upon hearing of his nephew’s captivity in Sedom,²⁰ Avraham gathered together a small army and entered the war of the four and the five kings with no fear, no trepidation, and no hesitation; only complete faith in G-d.

S’fat Emet on Avraham’s Connection to the Sukkah

ענין הליכה מבית לסוכה צא מדירת קבע כו'. הוא מעין מצוה ראשונה שנצטוו אברהם אע"ה לך לך מארצך. וכמו כן בבנ"י שנא' זכרתי לך חסד נעורייך כו' לכתך אחרי כו'. ובודאי אין יכולין לקיים זה כראוי רק בתחילתו. ולכן אחר יוהכ"פ שנעשים טהורים כקטן שנולד מתעורר זה הרצון בכל איש ישראל להיות נמשך אחר השי"ת. אחריו נרוצה. ומסתמא פ' חסד נעורייך הוא אברהם אבינו ראשיתן של ישראל.

The idea of going to the sukkah and leaving one’s permanent home is similar to the first commandment that Avraham Avinu was commanded (Bereishit 12:1): “Go for yourself from the land.” Similarly, regarding the Jewish people, it states (Yirmiyahu 2:2): “I remember the kindness (*chesed*) of your youth ... walk after Me [in the desert].” We certainly can only fulfill this at the beginning. Therefore, after Yom Kippur, when we have purified ourselves and are like a newborn child, each Jewish person is inspired to walk after God. “We will run after You” (Shir HaShirim 1:4). Ostensibly, the “kindness of your youth” refers to Avraham Avinu who was the beginning of the Jewish people.

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The tests continued when Sarah could not conceive a child,²¹ and Avraham took in Hagar, giving birth to his first son, Yishmael. The Midrash²² recounts that Avraham listened to the *Ruach HaKodesh*, the holy voice,

within Sarah, and only took in a new wife once he knew this was G-d's will. At the old age of 99, Avraham is commanded by G-d to circumcise himself and all men in his household,²³ which he does without question. Avraham instructs Sarah to lie about being his wife as they enter Grar,²⁴ and Avimelech takes her in as his wife, with Avraham patiently waiting for her return. When Sarah commands Avraham to expel Hagar and Yishmael from their home,²⁵ he turns to G-d in uncertainty. However, once again he's told to "listen to the voice of Sarah,"²⁶ and he immediately expels them. Last, when G-d commands Avraham in his tenth and final test to bring his beloved son Yitzchak as a human sacrifice,²⁷ Avraham wakes up early in the morning to complete this task with zeal. In fact, he is so zealous to follow the will of G-d, and complete his commandments, that he is about to kill his son when he is stopped by an angel. Through all ten tests, Avraham's faith in G-d never wavers. He proved himself to be the ultimate man of *emunah*. This is the second aspect of the "Sukkah Synthesis."

Striking the Synthesis

There is a unique and important connection between the two *middot* of *chessed* and *emunah*. With regard to mankind, Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski writes:²⁸

Chessed and emunah have a parallel relationship. To the degree that one possesses chessed, to that degree he can accept G-d as his sovereign, and subject himself to the will of G-d. Abraham's selflessness was so absolute that he became a bearer to the Divine presence.

From here we can learn true subservience to G-d is the wellspring

from which we learn to give to others. G-d gives and has faith in us, and, therefore, we too, need to give and believe.

With regard to G-d, it says in Tehillim (Psalms):

חֶסֶדִי ה' עוֹלָם אֲשִׁירָה לְדוֹר וָדוֹר אֲדַבֵּר
אֲמִירָתְךָ בְּפִי.

The kindnesses of G-d I shall sing forever; to generation after generation I shall make known Your faithfulness with my mouth.

Tehillim 89:2

In this perek (chapter) of Tehillim, two critical qualities by which G-d has managed His relationship with the Jewish people and mankind in general are highlighted: *chessed* and *emunah*. *Chessed* is an expression of G-d's innate goodness, a quality of kindness that generates blessings for His creatures. *Emunah* is an expression of G-d's innate truth, the integrity that assures He will be faithful to His word. The original covenant with David was a product of G-d's *chessed*. The anticipated fulfillment of that covenant, even though delayed, will be a product of His *emunah*.

On the first night of Sukkot, we invite in Avraham, the man symbolizing both *chessed* and *emunah*. We transport ourselves back into his life, to remind ourselves about his strengths and to inspire ourselves to work on those very *middot*, the *middot* that both Avraham and the sukkah share. Each remind us of the *chessed* G-d does for man and the *chessed* that man can do for G-d's honor. Each remind us of the *emunah* G-d has in us and the *emunah* we must have in G-d. With greater *emunah*, this Sukkot, perhaps we can increase our *chessed* and invite one more person to our sukkah and enjoy a welcoming Sukkot filled with company and happiness. It

is our mission on Sukkot to reignite the *middot* of *chessed* and *emunah* within ourselves and complete the "Sukkah Synthesis."

Endnotes

- 1 *Book of Education*, Anon., 13th Century Spain.
- 2 *The Way of G-d*, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Lutzatto, 1730's.
- 3 Rambam, *Hilchot Yom Tov*, 6:17.
- 4 Breishit 12:1.
- 5 *Breishit Rabbah* 39:14.
- 6 R. Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, 1816-1893.
- 7 *Breishit Rabbah* 48:9.
- 8 Breishit 18:1.
- 9 Breishit 18:5.
- 10 *Pirkei Avot* 1:15.
- 11 *Avot d'Rabbi Natan*, ch. 13.
- 12 *Breishit Rabbah* 38:13.
- 13 Breishit 17:4.
- 14 Ramban, 22:1.
- 15 Breishit 12:1.
- 16 Rashi 12:1.
- 17 Breishit 12:10.
- 18 *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer*, ch. 26.
- 19 Breishit 12:15.
- 20 Breishit 14:14.
- 21 Breishit 16:1.
- 22 *Breishit Rabbah* 45:2.
- 23 Breishit 17:7.
- 24 Breishit 20:1.
- 25 Breishit 21:10.
- 26 Breishit 21:12.
- 27 Breishit 22:1.
- 28 *Living Each Day*, Rabbi Abraham J. Twersky, page 361.